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BRIEFING PAPER
TO ACCOMPANY MAPS ON THE BURMA-CHINA BOUNDARY

G/I-11

20 January 1954

DOCUMENT NO. 3
NO CHANGE IN CLASS. LI
~~X~~ DECLASSIFIED
CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS S C
NEXT REVIEW DATE: _____
AUTH: HR 70-2
DATE 8-21-71 REVIEWER:

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Research and Reports

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BRIEFING PAPER
TO ACCOMPANY MAPS ON THE BURMA-CHINA BOUNDARY

The current state of affairs along the 900-mile frontier between Burma and China has focused attention upon two important aspects of this situation: (1) the Chinese Communist boundary claims, and (2) Chinese Communist policies towards the non-Chinese peoples inhabiting the Burma-China border area. This paper presents a short résumé of the history and current status of Chinese boundary claims and the development and implementation of Chinese Communist policies regarding minority groups. Brief background information is provided on topography, trans-border routes, and ethnic groups of the border area.

A. Chinese Communist Boundary Claims

The current Chinese Communist boundary claims along the Burma-China frontier are not new but are consistent with policies of former Chinese regimes. The present claims had their origin in the 1890's, when the British were attempting to demarcate a frontier between China and their newly acquired colony of Burma. Under the terms of an 1897 Sino-British convention, the boundary south of $25^{\circ}35'N$ was defined, but no agreement could be reached concerning the position of the line north of this point, and this part of the boundary was consequently left undefined. A 200 mile segment of the southern section of the boundary (from $22^{\circ}10'N$ to $23^{\circ}30'N$) was subsequently left undemarcated because the joint Sino-British boundary commission (1897-1900) charged with marking the boundary on the ground was unable to agree upon the delineation in this

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area. The position of the line was apparently settled in 1941, but recent actions of the Chinese Communists have reopened the question.

1. The Northern Undefined Boundary

The boundary north of $25^{\circ}35'N$ has never been defined by treaty. As commonly shown on non-Chinese published maps, the boundary follows the watershed between the Salween and Irrawaddy Rivers, except in the extreme northern part of Burma. This definition of the boundary was unilaterally proposed and adopted by the British about 1890. No Chinese Government has given official sanction to this definition of the boundary, and all present and past Chinese actions indicate interest in areas west of the Irrawaddy-Salween watershed. Although Chinese claims in northern Burma have varied in the past, Chinese maps since the 1930's have shown and quasi-official statements have indicated that the Chinese version of the boundary north of $25^{\circ}35'N$ follows an approximately east-west line, thus incorporating the entire northern portion of Burma -- about 22,000 square miles -- within China. There is no evidence that the Chinese ever administered or that Chinese settlers inhabited this extensive area. A case, however, might possibly be made for Chinese claims to a much smaller area west of the present de facto boundary.

2. The Southern Undemarcated Boundary

The portion of the boundary between $22^{\circ}10'N$ and $23^{\circ}30'N$ left that was undemarcated in 1900 apparently caused little concern until 1935, when the belief that the area contained valuable mineral deposits refocused attention on the need for demarcating the boundary. Between

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1935 and 1937, a joint Sino-British boundary commission headed by a neutral chairman explored and mapped the area, and an agreement was signed in 1941 that delimited in detail the course of the boundary. The Japanese invasion of Burma intervened, however, before boundary markers could be erected. Apparently using this as a pretext, Chinese Communist maps now show the boundary in this area pushed west to the Salween River. This version of the boundary is farther west than any proposed by Chinese representatives during previous boundary negotiations.

B. Topography and Transborder Routes

Along the entire course of the Burma-China boundary the terrain is mountainous. The northern Burma-China boundary area is characterized by parallel series of high, rugged, mountain ranges trending north-south and elevations ranging between 10,000 and 15,000 feet. Elevations tend to decrease from north to south. The river valleys also trend north-south and are deep, narrow, and steep-walled. The gorges are commonly hundreds and often thousands of feet deep. Dense tropical rain forests cloak the lower slopes, with evergreen and alpine vegetation on the higher slopes. Forest cover is not continuous, and patches of land are partially cleared as a result of the "slash-and-burn" agricultural practices of native tribesmen.

Highly dissected mountain and hill lands are characteristic of the southern Burma-China border area. Elevations are generally lower than in the north, ranging between 5,000 and 8,000 feet. In places the boundary follows streams and rivers where elevations are below 2,500 feet.

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Most of the major rivers flow through valleys with north-south alignment, but a small number of tributary streams that flow east or west cut across the border. There are a few intensively cultivated river basins and plains in the border area. Most of the hills and mountains are forested, but repeated cultivation has denuded sizeable areas of slope land.

The alignment of the mountains and rivers has made east-west communications difficult. The Burma Road is the only motorable highway crossing the frontier. No railways cross the Burma-China border. A railroad leading from the railhead city of Lashio to central Yunnan was contemplated in the past. Other transborder routes are no more than trails or tracks and are generally limited to fair-weather use. Several passes cross the high mountains north of 25°35'N; most of them are closed during the winter months. The passes are used only by a few Chinese traders, Lisu tribesmen seeking employment in Burma, and missionaries.

C. Ethnic Groups

The distribution of ethnic groups in the Burma-China border area is complex. South of the 25th parallel, the Tai peoples are the most numerous and important group. Tai is a generic term applied to a large and widespread group of peoples united by common cultural characteristics and a common language. The group includes the Siamese (or Thai), the Laotian Tai (the predominate ethnic group of Laos), the Shans of eastern Burma, and several Tai groups in China and northern Vietnam. The Burmese Tai (or Shan) and the Yunnan Tai are closely related, and their dialects are mutually intelligible. The Tai are primarily lowland dwellers that

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cultivate rice in the river basins and valleys. Inhabiting the hills and mountains along the southern section of the border are a variety of mountain-dwelling tribes, including the Wa, Lolo, Lahu, and Akha.

The distribution of ethnic groups is less complex and the density of population much lower north of 25°00'N. The Kachins, a hill-dwelling people, are the most numerous and occupy most of northern Burma. The mountain-dwelling Lisu tribe is found along much of the northern section of the border. Their settlements are seldom located at elevations below 5,000 feet. In the extreme northern section are a few Tibetans.

The number of Chinese and Burmans located in the Burma-China border area is small. Most of them live in the cities and market towns.

The Burma-China border peoples enjoyed a considerable amount of local autonomy in the past and were often organized into petty states governed by local headmen and chiefs. This semiautonomous status has continued to the present in some of the remoter areas. With a long history of virtual independence the border tribes have resisted in varying degrees outside administration and domination. Such resistance has been particularly characteristic among the less civilized Kachin, Wa, and Lisu groups.

D. Chinese Communist Minority Policies

The objectives of Chinese Communist policies regarding minority groups are to control by military, political, and economic means the previously semi-independent areas of non-Chinese population. To allay traditional minority distrust of Chinese methods and motives, the

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Communists have given lip-service to minority customs and cultural traits, promoted the growth of public education and health programs, and subsidized Chinese-minority trade relations. Furthermore, the implementation of basic Communist programs such as land reform, the marriage law, and other reforms distasteful to minority peoples has been postponed or implemented at a much slower rate than in other areas. As the culmination of these various policies, the Chinese Communists have capitalized upon minority desires for self-government by granting them the right to establish so-called "autonomous" governments. The steps necessary for establishing an "autonomous" government are carefully directed and guided by Chinese Communist cadres. By cleverly selecting and training local non-Chinese who are pro-Communists -- many of them idealistic young people -- to represent and administer the non-Chinese areas, fiction of non-Chinese control of the autonomous areas is maintained. Actually, all decisions of an autonomous government must be approved by the next higher Chinese government administrative agency. In the establishment of minority autonomous governments (about 50 at the county level or higher administrative level are now in existence throughout China as a whole), the Chinese Communists have fragmented the minority groups into small, easily manipulated administrative units, following traditional "divide and rule" tactics.

Since early 1953, three such autonomous administrative units have been organized along the Burma border, and a fourth is in the process

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of establishment. The most important in size and significance is the Thai Autonomous District in southern Yunnan adjacent to Laos and Burma. Its creation raised considerable concern in Southeast Asia, primarily in Thailand. The Thai feared that the Thai Autonomous District would be a training center for agents who would be sent to neighboring countries to foment dissident activities. Because of the cultural affinity of the Tai peoples in southern Yunnan with those in Burma, Laos, and Thailand, it was also feared that the Thai Autonomous District might become a nucleus for a communist-inspired and dominated "Greater Thai State," which would eventually incorporate neighboring Tai areas. All of the known information about this autonomous unit would suggest that its creation and subsequent actions are in line with the domestic policies of the Chinese Communists that are directed toward securing control over non-Chinese areas within China. The strategic location of the Thai Autonomous District, the reported development of roads into the area, and the increased Viet-minh activities in Laos, however, would offer opportunities for subversion of neighboring areas by Chinese Communists.

In 1953, two other autonomous units were organized -- one including primarily Lahu tribespeople and the other including both Tai and Kachin tribes. A recent report states that an autonomous unit along the northern Burma-China boundary is in the preliminary process of organization for Lisu peoples.

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ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE BURMA-CHINA BORDER AREA
POPULATION STATISTICS*

Tai

In Burma (Shan):

775,000

700,000 in the Shan States
75,000 in northern Burma

In Yunnan:

1,000,000 estimated in southwestern Yunnan

Kachin

In Burma:

305,000

235,000 in northern Burma
70,000 in northern Shan States

In China:

100,000 (estimated)

Wa

In Burma:

335,000

In China:

58,000

Lahu

In Burma:

66,000

In China:

50,000

Lisu

In Burma:

30,000

In China:

80,000 (estimated)

* Population statistics for ethnic groups in Burma are primarily from 1931 and 1941 census data. Population statistics for China are notoriously unreliable and, regardless of source, are estimates.

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LIST OF AUTONOMOUS UNITS IN THE BURMA-CHINA BORDER AREA*

1. Name: Hsi-shuang-pan-na Thai Autonomous District
Date Established: January 1953
Administrative Capital: Ch'e-li (21°59'N - 100°49'E)
Area: 20,000 sq. km.
Population: 200,000 consisting of "47 nationalities" or "tribes",
of which 140,000 are of the Tai ethnic group
2. Name: Ta-hung Tai-Kachin Autonomous District
Date Established: July 1953
Administrative Capital: Meng-shih (24°27'N - 98°36'E)
Area: 15,000 sq. km. (estimate)
Population: Total 400,000, of which 175,000 are Tai and 97,000
Kachin
3. Name: Lan-ts'ang Lahu Autonomous Hsien
Date Established: 7 April 1953
Administrative Capital: Lan-ts'ang (22°37'N - 99°59'E)
Area: 10,000 sq. km.
Population: Total 203,000, of which 93,000 are Lahu
4. Name: Nu-chiang Lisu Autonomous District
Date Established: Preparatory announcement made in October 1953;
normally several months elapse prior to formal
establishment.
Administrative Capital: Unknown
Area: 10,000 sq. km. (estimate)
Population: Total 100,000; no breakdown as to the percentage of Lisu

* Data obtained from Chinese Communist press releases. The accuracy of the area and population statistics is open to question.

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